Israeli army fires shots near UN troops in Lebanon

BEIRUT: The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon said gunfire from an Israeli position hit close to its peacekeepers twice on Friday, reporting no casualties but decrying a "concerning trend".

The Unifil has repeatedly reported Israeli fire near or towards its personnel in recent months, and last week said an Israeli attack near one of its positions lightly wounded a peacekeeper.

Personnel patrolling in south Lebanon on Friday "reported 15 rounds of small arms fire that struck no more than 50 metres away from them", a Unifil statement said.

Shortly afterwards, "peacekeepers in a second patrol in the same area reported approximately 100 rounds of machine-gun fire struck approximately 50 metres from them", it added, reporting no damage or injuries.

"Peacekeepers assessed that the fire came from an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) position south of the Blue Line in both cases," the statement said, referring to the de facto border, and "sent a 'stop fire' request through its liaison channels".

It said Unifil had informed the Israeli army about the peacekeepers' activities in advance.

"Incidents like these are happening on a too-regular basis, and becoming a concerning trend," the statement said.

"We reiterate our call to the IDF to cease aggressive behaviour and attacks on or near peacekeepers working for peace and stability along the Blue Line."

Unifil has acted as a buffer between Israel and Lebanon for decades, and recently has been working with Lebanon's army to support a year-old ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah.

The force on Friday noted that "attacks on or near peacekeepers are serious violations" of a 2006 UN Security Council resolution that formed the basis of the current ceasefire.

Under the November 2024 truce, Israel was to withdraw its forces from south Lebanon, but it has kept them at five areas it deems strategic and carries out regular strikes on Lebanon, usually saying it is targeting Hezbollah sites and operatives.

Under heavy US pressure and fears of expanded Israeli strikes, Lebanon has committed to disarming Hezbollah, starting in the south near the frontier.

Last August, the UN Security Council voted for the peacekeepers to leave Lebanon in 2027.—AFP

18-year-old arrested in US over alleged attack plot

WASHINGTON: An 18-year-old man with a history of mental health issues was arrested in the US state of North Carolina on New Year's Eve for allegedly planning a knife-and-hammer attack in the name of the militant Islamic State armed group.

A judge ordered Christian Sturdivant, who was arrested on Dec 31, to remain in custody until a further hearing on Jan 7.

Sturdivant was charged with providing material support to a "terrorist organisation," after undercover FBI agents fooled him into believing they were members of the IS.

"He pledged his allegiance to IS with that undercover agent, and he disclosed his plans to 'do jihad' soon," said federal prosecutor Russ Ferguson at a press conference.

He revealed to the second agent his plans to carry out a knife-and-hammer attack at a grocery store and fast food restaurant in the town of Mint Hill on New Year's Eve, Ferguson said.

"He said he was going to wear a Kevlar vest and attack people with knives and hammers. And of course, he talked about when he was going to carry out this attack, which was New Year's Eve."

Sturdivant had been known to the FBI since 2022, when he was still a minor, as he had been "in contact via social media with an unidentified IS member", said special agent James Barnacle.

But no charges were brought at the time and he received psychological care before police authorities were again alerted to his online activities.

Ferguson stressed that the suspect was put under 24-hour surveillance when it became clear he was planning an attack.—AFP

Muslim bloc alarmed by deteriorating Gaza situation

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Strip. "Any attempt to impede their ability to operate is unacceptable," the statement said.

The foreign ministers also expressed "full support" for a US-drafted resolution that endorses Mr Trump's plan to end the war in Gaza and was adopted by the UN Security Council in November last year.

They also reaffirmed their support for Mr Trump's Gaza plan and their "intention to contribute to the successful implementation thereof, with a view to ensuring the sustainability of the ceasefire, bringing an end to the war in Gaza, to secure a dignified life for the Palestinian people who have endured prolonged humanitarian suffering, and leading to a credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood".

They also called for the "urgent need to immediately initiate and scale up early recovery efforts", including the provision of durable and dignified shelter to protect the population from the severe winter conditions.

The joint statement urged the international community to "uphold its legal and moral responsibilities to pressure Israel, as the occupying power, to immediately lift constraints on the entry and distribution of essential supplies, including tents, shelter materials, medical assistance, clean water, fuel and sanitation support".

The ministers also called for "immediate, full and unhindered humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip without any interference by either party, through the UN and its agencies, the rehabilitation of infrastructure and hospitals, and the opening of the Rafah Crossing in both directions as stipulated in President Trump's plan".

FRANKFURT: A jet flies past the full moon, also known as 'Wolf Moon', over this city in western Germany.—AFP

Maduro says Venezuela is ready for talks with US

CARACAS: President Nicolas Maduro on Thursday dodged a question about an alleged US attack on a dock in Venezuela, but said he was open to cooperation with Washington after weeks of American military pressure.

"Wherever they want and whenever they want," Maduro said of the idea of dialogue with the United States on drug trafficking, oil, and migration in an interview on state TV.

To date, Maduro has not confirmed a US land attack on a docking facility in his country that allegedly targeted drug boats, according to US President Donald Trump's comments on Monday.

Asked point-blank if he confirmed or denied the attack, Maduro said, "This could be something we talk about in a few days." The attack would amount to the first known land strike of the US military campaign against drug trafficking from Latin America.

Trump on Monday said the United States hit and destroyed a docking area for alleged Venezuelan drug boats.

Trump would not say if it was a military or CIA operation or where the strike occurred, noting only that it was "along the shore."

"There was a major explosion in the dock area where they load the boats up with drugs," he told reporters at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida.

"So we hit all the boats, and now we hit the area, it's the implementation area, that's where they implement. And that is no longer around."

For weeks, Trump has threatened ground strikes on drug cartels in the region, saying they would start "soon," but this is the first apparent example.

US forces have also carried out numerous strikes on boats in both the Caribbean Sea and the eastern Pacific Ocean since September, targeting what Washington says are drug smugglers.

The administration has provided no evidence that the targeted boats were involved in drug trafficking; however, this has prompted debate about the legality of these operations.

International law experts and rights groups say the strikes likely amount to extrajudicial killings, a charge that Washington denies.—AFP

Tax rules eased in Argentina to draw out 'mattress dollars'

BUENOS AIRES: Argentine President Javier Milei on Friday signed into law a so-called "tax innocence" bill, which aims to encourage people to bank dollars stashed under mattresses or in offshore accounts by forgiving a degree of tax evasion.

Over years of high inflation and currency controls, Argentines traded their battered pesos for dollars, which they often hoarded at home, in cash.

The government estimates Argentines are sitting on some $251 billion in what are commonly called "mattress dollars" — six times the Central Bank's reserves which stood at $41 billion on December 30.

Milei has been on a mission to get citizens to bank their greenbacks to help the state meet foreign debt payments totalling $19 billion this year, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

The International Monetary Fund, which Argentina owes tens of billions of dollars, asked the government to step up its efforts to rebuild its depleted currency reserves.

To lure deposits, Congress in December voted to raise 66-fold the amount for which citizens can face prosecution for tax evasion to the equivalent of $70,000 per fiscal year.

The law also reduces the statute of limitations — the number of years after an alleged offense during which a person can be held liable — for financial crimes and creates a new regime which exempts taxpayers from having to report changes in their net worth.

Economy Minister Luis Caputo urged banks to immediately accept the deposits from people registered under the forgiveness regime.

He advised citizens to deposit their money in the state-owned Banco Nacion if private banks asked too many questions about the provenance of the funds.

"They deposit their dollars in the bank and can access them immediately, to spend as they wish or to save and earn interest, just like anywhere else in the world," Caputo wrote on X.

Opposition leaders, however, warned that the initiative would turn Argentina into a money laundering haven.

"It transforms us into a haven for laundering dirty money and of laundering by drug traffickers," Jorge Taiana, a center-left opposition congressman, said on X.

Milei launched a tax amnesty program within months of taking office in December 2023.

That scheme brought more than $20 billion into the banking system.

The funds were frozen in special accounts until Friday, when owners gained the right to freely dispose of them.—AFP

Tech campaigner decries US 'punishment' after visa sanctions

WASHINGTON: British tech campaigner Imran Ahmed on Friday decried a US visa ban as "punishment" for his organisation's work combating disinformation and holding major online platforms accountable, saying that Washington's actions amounted to "tyrannical behaviour."

Ahmed, a US permanent resident, heads the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), a nonprofit watchdog that researches the harmful effects of online disinformation. He was among five European figures whom the State Department recently said would be denied visas.

The department accused the group of attempting to "coerce" tech platforms into censoring Americans' viewpoints, a charge they reject. The European Union and several member states strongly condemned the US sanctions.

The US announcement came after the International Fact-Checking Network said last month it was "deeply concerned" by reports the State Department had instructed staff to deny visas to people engaged in fact-checking and content moderation.

This agency spoke with Imran Ahmed after he sued President Donald Trump's administration in a New York court.

QUESTION: How do you interpret the US visa restrictions over "censorship" concerns?

ANSWER: This appears to be a punishment for my advocacy and for the research that CCDH does, looking into social media platforms, looking into AI platforms, identifying harms, informing the public, and then urging lawmakers and regulators, both in the US and globally, to take action.

Governments are the only entity that can censor people with the threat of overwhelming force. A nonprofit speaking — that's the opposite of censorship.

That's what the First Amendment is there to protect — our ability to speak, without fear or favor. However, in this instance, it does appear that I'm being punished precisely for my speech, which would be an act of censorship.

QUESTION: How do you seek to challenge the visa ban?

ANSWER: What we've done initially is take up a restraining order against the government to prevent them from taking any action against me, detaining me or arresting me, and that's important, because previously, when the Trump administration has sought to cancel green cards for legal permanent residents, it has arrested them through ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement).

The first Trump administration was under no obligation to award me an extraordinary ability visa, and it did.

My green card (permanent residency) has been given to me because I'm married to a US citizen and I have American children now, and they have to abide by both the law and the constitution in how they treat me as a legal permanent resident, and that's precisely why we've gone to court.—AFP

Nigerian police charge boxer crash driver with dangerous driving

LAGOS: Nigerian police on Friday charged the driver of a car carrying British boxer Anthony Joshua that was involved in a fatal crash with "reckless" and "dangerous driving causing death".

Adeniyi Mobolaji Kayode, 46, was also charged with "driving without a valid national driver's licence" and "driving without due care and attention, causing bodily harm and damage to property", Oluseyi Babaseyi, a spokesman for the police in Ogun state, said.

He was granted five million naira bail ($3,500) with two sureties but will remain in detention until he meets the bail conditions, Babaseyi said.

Kayode was driving the former two-time heavyweight champion and two of his friends, Latif Ayodele and Sina Ghami, on a busy highway linking Lagos and Ibadan in southwest Nigeria when the Lexus SUV in which they were travelling rammed into a stationary truck on Monday.

Nigerian police and state officials said that Ayodele and Ghami died at the scene, while Joshua and Kayode sustained minor injuries.

Ghami was Joshua's long-time strength and conditioning coach, while Ayodele was his personal trainer, according to British media.

The traffic compliance and enforcement agency in the Ogun state section of the highway, where the crash occurred, said earlier in the week that its preliminary investigations showed that the vehicle was moving at an excessive speed and had a burst tyre before the collision.

Remains repatriated

The crash occurred in Sagamu in the southwestern Ogun state, from where Joshua's family hails.

He is known to visit the area when he is in the country.

Local media reported that Kayode had been part of Joshua's team whenever he visited Nigeria.

Both men were treated in hospitals in Nigeria's commercial capital, Lagos, after the accident.

They were discharged on Wednesday and Kayode was then taken into police custody in Abeokuta, the Ogun state capital.

A government source suggested on Thursday that the remains of the victims had been repatriated to United Kingdom—AFP

Britain records hottest, sunniest year ever

LONDON: Britain experienced its hottest and sunniest year on record in 2025, surpassing the previous high set in 2022, the national weather service said on Friday, as persistent high-pressure systems and unusually warm seas drove up temperatures.

The Met Office said the average annual temperature was 10.09 degrees Celsius (50.16 degrees Fahrenheit), topping the 2022 average of 10.03C and marking only the second year since detailed records began in 1884 that the annual mean temperature has exceeded 10C.

The reading also placed four of the last five years in the top five warmest years since 1884, an indication of just how fast the climate is changing, the Met Office said last month when it first flagged the possibility of a new record.

"Although it doesn't mean every year will be the warmest on record, it is clear from our weather observations and climate models that human-induced global warming is impacting the UK's climate," said Mark McCarthy, head of climate attribution at the Met Office.

All of the top-10 warmest years have occurred in the last two decades, and since the start of the 21st century, a record has been set for UK annual mean temperature six times in 2002, 2003, 2006, 2014, 2022 and now 2025.

The data aligns with global trends, with the World Meteorological Organisation saying in 2025 that the last 10 years have been the 10 warmest since records began.

The European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) has predicted 2025 will be the world's second- or third-warmest on record in modern data, as extreme weather continued to hit regions around the globe last year.

Globally, 2024 was the hottest year on record, as well as the warmest for Europe — the planet's fastest-warming continent.—Reuters

Aden launches operation against separatists

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strikes were carried out by the Saudi-led coalition, adding that the action would continue until the STC withdraws from the Hadramaut and Mahra governorates.

A military spokesman for the STC said it was in a "decisive and existential" war with Yemeni forces.

Meanwhile, after the strikes on Friday, the UAE said that the last of its forces had left Yemen, as the country sought de-escalation of rising tensions in the Arabian Peninsula.

"The UAE concluded the presence of its counterterrorism forces," a government official said, adding Abu Dhabi "remains committed to dialogue, de-escalation, and internationally supported processes as the only sustainable path to peace".

'Transition to independence'

The STC's advance has raised the possibility that South Yemen, a separate state from 1967 to 1990, might declare independence, while dealing a hammer blow to slow-moving peace negotiations with the Houthi rebels in Sanaa.

In a surprise announcement on Friday, the STC president Aidaros Alzubidi announced a two-year transition to an independent state, and said that the transitional phase would include dialogue with the Houthis in the north.

He also warned the group would declare independence "immediately" if there was no dialogue or if southern Yemen again came under attack.

"We announce the commencement of a transitional phase lasting two years, and the Council calls on the international community to sponsor dialogue between the concerned parties in the South and the North," Alzubidi said in a televised address.

"This constitutional declaration shall be considered immediately and directly effective before that date if the call is not heeded or if the people of the South, their land, or their forces are subjected to any military attacks," he added.

Diplomacy, dialogue urged

Alarmed over the tensions between its two main allies in the Gulf region, Pakistan's Foreign Office continued to urge resolution of the situation in Yemen through dialogue and diplomacy.

In a statement issued on Friday, FO Spokesperson Tahir Andrabi said that Pakistan was committed to the "unity and territorial integrity of Yemen".

Islamabad "hopes that the positive steps undertaken by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates contribute towards peaceful resolution of the issue," he said.

In his remarks, the spokesperson highlighted "the wisdom and far-sightedness" shown by the leadership of the two countries in addressing the situation in Yemen.

"Such efforts reflect a common desire for regional peace and stability by the two brotherly countries," he said, adding: "Pakistan remains ready to play its positive role in strengthening the values of partnership, brotherhood and unity for lasting peace and stability in the region".—Agencies

Cervical cancer vaccine now part of Sindh's programme

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across Sindh, parents' lack of interest and negative social media campaigns emerged as major challenges, particularly in Karachi.

According to health experts, cervical cancer is the second deadliest cancer among women worldwide and remains a major public health concern in Pakistan, with a mortality rate exceeding 65pc.

HPV is the primary cause of cervical cancer, and its vaccine is the world's first-ever cancer prevention vaccine.

Health experts say the vaccine is safe, effective, and provides 100pc protection against cervical cancer.

According to officials, Pakistan is the 149th country to introduce this vaccine into its immunisation schedule. It is already being used in Muslim countries, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Indonesia.